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Arizona school districts hope that millions of dollars of newly approved federal stimulus aid will help them ease overcrowding in classrooms by rehiring thousands of laid-off K-12 teachers and retaining those in danger of getting pink slips.

School officials in the Valley on Wednesday hailed as a welcome lifeline the \$211.8 million for Arizona's education system included in a massive aid package passed by Congress a day earlier.

Although the funding comes after the school year has started in most districts and budgets have been drawn up, officials said it will be put to good use - rehiring fired teachers, retaining others whose jobs are in jeopardy or hiring new ones.

The Arizona Education Association estimates state schools lost 3,500 educator positions last school year, association President Andrew Morrill said.

Those jobs include instructional aides as well as principals and other school staff, such as reading specialists.

"I'm hearing districts do not have the funds to hire the people they need (this year)," which would make the money an added benefit to hire extra staff for overcrowded classrooms, Morrill added.

Despite voter approval in May of a temporary 1-cent-on-the-dollar state sales-tax increase, most school districts across Arizona have been reeling from two successive years of budget cuts, which totaled about \$750 million for the current fiscal year.

Approval of the sales-tax increase spared them from absorbing about an additional \$410 million in cuts in the current school year.

The impact of the stimulus funding on the current school year is hard to assess.

"The timing of it makes it difficult for districts to use" because school has already started for most students, said Chuck Essigs, director of government relations for the Arizona Association of School Business Officials. "It would have been a lot better if the money had been available sooner."

Nevertheless, Essigs said, "it's better late than never."

The Education Department hasn't yet released rules for distributing and spending the money, but the federal government said Tuesday that the funds will "support 4,000 education jobs" in Arizona.

Neither the state nor districts know, for example, if they can use the money to hire or retain principals or instructional aides.

Still, the new money represents about a 4 percent increase in state education funding.

The state has 1.1 million students, so that equals an average of \$190 a student, Essigs calculated. "It's a significant amount of money," he said.

The law requires the state to maintain a certain level of state funding to be eligible for the stimulus money.

"That prevents the state from reducing the current level of state support and replacing it with

state dollars," said John Arnold, the state budget director.

Craig Pletenik, spokesman for the Phoenix Union High School District, said, "We're thrilled that Arizona will be getting help during this difficult financial time. We can't afford to keep reducing staff or making class sizes larger."

Margo Olivares-Seck, interim superintendent of the Tolleson Union High School District, said she is grateful for the money but is looking for direction on when it will come and how much her district is entitled to.

"When I know the rules, I can play the game," she said.

The Tolleson district cut its budget last April by \$3.5 million and has reduced its workforce by 20 percent in the past couple of years. A ballot measure to supplement state funding was also defeated in March.

"We'll review the reductions we made last spring and determine which ones we can bring back that have the most direct effect on instructional programs for students," she said.

But when she and other district officials will be able to do that is another question.

The education funds are part of a \$26.1 billion package passed Tuesday by the U.S. House and signed by President Barack Obama. It includes money for public-safety jobs and medical services for low-income Americans.

U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D.-Tempe, said he voted for the bill because he wants to keep more teachers in the classroom.

"It's a good thing for education because there have been so many cuts," said Mitchell, a former Tempe High School teacher. "We can't shortchange kids."

The state has 30 days to apply for the money from the U.S. Education Department and will have the rest of the fiscal year, through June 2011, to use the funds, Arnold said.

Paul Senseman, Gov. Jan Brewer's spokesman, said local school districts will have to apply to the state for the money. School districts are wary the stimulus funds are short-term money and may not help in future years.

"There are guidelines attached to funds, and it's not always money that can be used in ways that Mesa Public Schools would use the money," said Kathy Bareiss, spokeswoman for Mesa Public Schools, the largest district in the state. "We don't want to create a lot of jobs that we can't fund in the future."